

# **A CALL FOR SYSTEM OF CARE NORTH CAROLINA FAMILIES UNITED, INC./FFCMH**

## **INTRODUCTION**

North Carolina Families United, Inc., North Carolina's Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health is a statewide organization for parents, families, and caregivers of children with mental health, emotional, and behavior health challenges and professionals that share our mission. We believe that most children can and should be served in their homes with the proper supports and interventions in place. We also believe in prevention, early intervention, and community-based services for children and families that promote safety, permanence, and wellness in the home, school, and community. The mission of North Carolina Families United is to:

- ◆ Link families to State and community partners for the purpose of improving the lives of children, youth, and families with emotional, behavioral, or mental health challenges;
- ◆ Focus active attention on the unique strengths and needs of these children and their families by educating and advising policy makers, service providers, other advocacy organizations;
- ◆ Actively promote policies and procedures that serve the best interests of these children, youth, and their families through work with State and local officials;
- ◆ Actively promote, model and adhere to the values and principles of System of Care.

Since 1993, North Carolina has received five federal grants to implement System of Care, each intended as 'seed money' to help our State implement System of Care statewide. Families of children with significant behavioral, educational, and social challenges want and need System of Care in their communities, across all 100 counties in our state. Yet, in 2005, North Carolina's children and their families still do not have the benefit of a statewide System of Care. The purpose of this White Paper is to define System of Care in a way that is consistent with national standards of best practice and to issue a call for action for implementation of a comprehensive System of Care across North Carolina, one that uses common language and a common approach that families understand and support.

## **WHY SYSTEM OF CARE IS IMPORTANT**

The goal of System of Care is to help families help their children succeed at home, in school, and in the community. In North Carolina and nation-wide, System of Care is considered the best way of planning, developing and delivering services and support for children and their families. Because children are not little adults, their services must be planned and delivered in ways that fully involve their families, peer groups, neighborhoods, schools and community. This is especially important for children who have serious challenges related to their behaviors, health, school performance and safety at home, in their schools and in the community. System of Care is beneficial to families, agencies and communities because it enriches the array of community-based resources,

## **A CALL FOR SYSTEM OF CARE NORTH CAROLINA FAMILIES UNITED, INC./FFCMH**

reduces unnecessary separation of youngsters from their families, and actively supports the development of healthy and productive families. System of Care emphasizes strengths and involves families as full partners in the care of their children as well as the improvement of the service system. When agencies, families and community stakeholders work collaboratively to blend funds, staff, and training resources, communities realize increased efficiencies in agency resources, time, and effort.

System of Care is fundamentally changing the relationships families have with the service system at every level. Collaboration and partnership between families and service providers is the thread that links successful programs, policies and practices. Many federal and state policies mandate parental involvement. Parents now provide services, act as advocates for change, mentor other families, shape programs, create policies and carry out public service agendas. Parents and professionals working collaboratively as partners are now recognized as a best practice. These collaborative partnerships have resulted in measurable and direct positive benefits for families, children and providers.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Center for Mental Health Services, SAMHSA, Federal Department of Health and Human Services<sup>2</sup>: "The System of Care offers the best possible programmatic, fiscal, and organizational context for implementing and sustaining evidenced-based interventions, because it:

- 1) Offers a strategic public health approach for using the evidence-based intervention to meet a specific clinical need of the entire population of children with a serious emotional disturbance and their families living in a specific jurisdiction;
- 2) Provides a method for fiscally sustaining the evidence-based intervention through the financial contributions of the various child-serving sectors that collaborate to meet the specific and multiple needs of these children; and
- 3) Creates the organizational structures and processes to integrate the evidence-based intervention into the individualized service plan for a child with a serious emotional disturbance and the child's family."

Similarly, the federal Administration for Children and Families notes: "System of Care was originally developed to address the needs of children with serious emotional disturbances. It is now being applied to other populations, whose needs require services from multiple agencies, including families in the child welfare system. This broader implementation will help more families benefit from the System of Care focus on improving access to and availability of services, reducing service and funding fragmentation, and improving the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of frontline service providers."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Family Support America "Making Room At The Table". (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Center for Mental Health Services, Children's Service Initiative (2004)

<sup>3</sup> Administration for Children and Families, National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, (2005)

## **A CALL FOR SYSTEM OF CARE NORTH CAROLINA FAMILIES UNITED, INC./FFCMH**

More than 200,000 children under the age of 18 in North Carolina have a serious emotional disturbance. These children are at substantially greater risk for school dropout, school expulsion, drug or alcohol abuse, unplanned teen pregnancy, and conviction of crimes. When a child experiences a serious emotional disturbance the life of the entire family is changed. A recent North Carolina study reported that caring for children with emotional disorders takes a toll on the child's family, causing harm to the family's well being. The effects tend to worsen over time, suggesting that the families and caregivers do not get used to caring for their children.<sup>4</sup> Our current systems are often ill equipped to deal with the multiple and varied challenges and needs of these children and their families. Feelings of isolation, frustration and anger are the norm as families attempt to find help for their children and support for themselves.

As some communities in North Carolina develop System of Care, we are discovering that we very much need the help of parents and youth to help create strong and lasting positive changes in our child-serving systems. Changing the way business is done means that families, youth, professionals and the community work as full partners to help make sure that children and families have the support and services they need, when and where they need them.

System of Care is based on a set of values and principles that set a high standard of quality for how services and supports are developed and delivered. It is a research-based framework<sup>5</sup> that helps communities and states put the philosophy into action by building structures and resources that make System of Care work for children and their families. System of Care looks a little different in each community because it is based on the strengths and needs of the families in those communities.

### **WHAT IS A SYSTEM OF CARE (SOC)?**

The purpose of a System of Care is to make comprehensive, flexible and effective support available for children, youth and families throughout the community and through this assistance make the community a better place to live<sup>6</sup>

The Child, Adolescent and Family Branch of the federal Center for Mental Health Services and the Steering Committee of the Council for Coordination and Collaboration for the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families

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2. Early, T.J., Gregoire, T.K. & McDonald, T.P. (2002). Child functioning and caregiver well being in families of children with emotional disorders: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Family Issues*, 23, pp. 374-391.
  3. Burns, B.J. & Hoagwood, K. (2002). *Community treatment for youth: evidence-based interventions for severe emotional and behavior disorders*. New York, New York Oxford University Press.
  4. Franz, John. Paperboat.com

## **A CALL FOR SYSTEM OF CARE NORTH CAROLINA FAMILIES UNITED, INC./FFCMH**

Program have published their official definitions of a System of Care from a 'mental health' perspective<sup>7</sup>:

The short definition states that System of Care is a network of community services and supports for children and youth with serious mental health needs. Families, youth and providers become partners so each child can function better at home, in school, and in the community. The longer definition states that System of Care is a coordinated network of community-based services and supports that are organized to meet the challenges of children and youth with serious mental health needs and their families. Families and youth work in partnership with public and private organizations so services and supports are effective, build on the strengths of individuals, and address each person's cultural and linguistic needs. System of Care helps children, youth and families function better at home, in school, in the community and throughout life.

System of Care is increasingly defined across the country in a broader view, as an organized network of services and supports that helps children with complex behavioral, education, social, and/or safety needs and their families get the services they want and need in their local communities. In fact, System of Care is not just used to meet mental health needs and it is not a mental health 'program'. A System of Care integrates the work of education, juvenile justice, health, mental health, child welfare, family court, and other helping organizations with families through team work and shared responsibility. Families are seen as important team members, working side by side with professionals and community members to plan, deliver, and monitor services for their children.

### **HOW DOES A SYSTEM OF CARE WORK?**

In a System of Care, every effort is made to build on the personal strengths of each child and family, and community. Resources available to children and families through their extended family, neighborhoods and the broader community are recognized as important and enduring sources of family support. At the same time, it is important to establish an array of more formalized services to help children and families receive assistance when and where they need it most. System of Care is clearly based on a strong set of values and principles. However, it is not 'just' a philosophy. It is a well-defined national model that helps children, youth, families, providers and community work together to help families help their children succeed in home, school, and in the community. This is done through a teamwork approach:

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<sup>7</sup> Center for Mental Health Services, 2004

# **A CALL FOR SYSTEM OF CARE NORTH CAROLINA FAMILIES UNITED, INC./FFCMH**

**1) Child and Family Teams** provide direct services and supports: Children with complex challenges and needs, and their families, often need a flexible mixture of formal agency services and informal supports (such as recreational clubs, mentoring by a family friend) in order to reach their goals. In a System of Care, these supports and services are planned, coordinated, delivered and monitored through a Child and Family Team. The Child and Family Team (CFT) is the 'heart' of the System of Care, building a team unique for each family, comprised of those persons who are important in their everyday lives. Child and Family Teams are the way that children and their families get the help and assistance they need to plan their services, have them delivered in a coordinated way, and constantly assess what's working and what's not working - changing the plan as needed to better meet the needs of the child and family over time. Many of the 'child-serving systems' (such as social services, juvenile courts, mental health, etc.) are beginning to require Child and Family Teams as the way they plan and deliver services, which is consistent with national 'best practices'. The Child and Family Team should develop one unified Child and Family Plan that all participants use, regardless of their particular agency. The more detailed planning forms required for agency partners should then be connected to this single unified Child and Family Plan that clearly explains the details of what each partner will do across all involved agencies. For example, the NC Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse Services requires a person-centered plan for children and families who need behavioral health services; public schools require an Individual Education Plan for children receiving Special Education services through the public schools. These more specific plans should be connected back to the broader Child and Family Plan so that children and families have one unified overall plan that is understandable and unifies everyone's efforts.

**2) Community Collaboratives** promote teamwork and change in the broader community that is necessary for Child and Family Teams to succeed in their work with children and families. A Community Collaborative is a diverse governance team that brings together decision-makers (people responsible for services) and stakeholders (people using the services) to "drive", manage, and monitor the local System of Care. It requires that agencies and providers work together with families and communities in a give-and-take way – finding and building common goals, finding concrete ways to promote collaboration, put 'best practices' in place, and decrease fragmentation instead of protecting turf and business as usual. Community Collaboratives are open, public meetings. Members of Child and Family Teams should bring concerns and needs to their Community Collaborative. For example, help in developing new services to fill service gaps identified through Child and Family Teams, help to organize System of Care trainings, and other activities that help Child and Family Teams help children and families succeed in their local community. In order for Child and Family Teams to succeed, community leaders and local organization decision-makers must also work together as a team.

**3) NC State Collaborative for Children and Families** is a state level group of administrators, families, advocacy organizations, educators, private providers and public

# **A CALL FOR SYSTEM OF CARE NORTH CAROLINA FAMILIES UNITED, INC./FFCMH**

providers that work together in a neutral environment to identify strengths, issues, barriers, funding, and identify policy and legislative mandates that need to be addressed in order to develop a seamless System of Care for children and families in North Carolina. The State Collaborative supports Community Collaboratives and ultimately Child and Family Teams by developing relationships among its members, collaborating on child and family focused initiatives and sharing information throughout the State.

## **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF FAMILIES IN A SYSTEM OF CARE?**

Families are at the center of the System of Care. They should expect to be partners in the local Community Collaborative with agencies, schools, and others in the community. They should also expect to have a strong voice on their Child and Family Team, planning and making decisions about their child's services and supports. Families inform Child and Family Team members about their strengths and values, and they advocate for their children and themselves. Families help inform Community Collaboratives about what services and supports are needed in their community in order to help children and families succeed.

## **HOW IS SYSTEM OF CARE DIFFERENT?**

Two of the key ways System of Care is different from conventional service delivery approaches are the amount of family involvement and the focus on family strengths. It is a 'family-driven, child-directed' model. First, System of Care uses the personal strengths of the family and other team members to plan and deliver services. Second, it involves families as partners on Child and Family Teams that plan services and make decisions about services for their own children and to help improve services for other children and families in their community. System of Care is based on a set of values, principles and beliefs about how children and their families should expect to receive services and be involved in improving things for their own and other families in the community. These include:

- ◆ There is a comprehensive array (types) of local services & supports;
- ◆ Services and supports are individualized according to the child and families' unique strengths, cultural differences, needs and challenges;
- ◆ Services and supports are provided in the least restrictive, most 'normal' environments that promote strengths and connection to family and friends;
- ◆ Families and surrogate families are full participants in all aspects of the System of Care;
- ◆ Services and supports are included and connected in one unified plan;
- ◆ Case management services help families organize and work with in multiple services;
- ◆ Children and their families' strengths, challenges, and needs are identified and addressed early;

## A CALL FOR SYSTEM OF CARE NORTH CAROLINA FAMILIES UNITED, INC./FFCMH

- ◆ Youth receive help to transition to adult services;
- ◆ Children and their families receive effective advocacy to protect their rights;
- ◆ Services and supports build upon child and family strengths and are responsive to cultural differences and special needs.

There are several key outcomes, or results, for children, families and the community that should be expected from active implementation of System of Care. These include:

- ◆ Increased school attendance and children finishing school;
- ◆ Safer schools;
- ◆ Decreases in home, school, and community violence;
- ◆ Decreases in out of home placement;
- ◆ Decreases in abuse and neglect;
- ◆ Decreases in juvenile arrests;
- ◆ Creation of a child and family friendly System of Care;
- ◆ Increased power of advocacy for children and family issues in the political system at the state and local level;
- ◆ Stronger children, youth, families and communities.

It takes time to implement System of Care and to see improvements. One way to get a sense of how System of Care is different and whether improvements are occurring in a community is to contrast System of Care with more 'conventional' approaches to providing services to children and their families, as illustrated below:

'Conventional' Approach to Care	System of Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Plans are service-driven</li> <li>◆ Children's needs are matched to a menu of existing services</li> <li>◆ Plans relate only to the child</li> <li>◆ Service plans are developed FOR (not necessarily with) children and families</li> <li>◆ Plans list strengths but focus on deficits</li> <li>◆ Services are often offered as a "one size fits all"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Plans are driven by the strengths and needs of the child and family</li> <li>◆ Plans incorporate existing services if family needs them, but rely heavily on newly created services, informal supports and community resources</li> <li>◆ Plans address the whole family, are family-driven and child-directed</li> <li>◆ No planning sessions occur without presence of family and children (if appropriate for the child)</li> <li>◆ Plans are strength based and all interventions include the unique strengths, values, attitudes and preferences of child, family and community</li> <li>◆ Services are modified to be culturally competent and individualized</li> </ul>

## **A CALL FOR SYSTEM OF CARE NORTH CAROLINA FAMILIES UNITED, INC./FFCMH**

Many agencies and community helpers work together to form a System of Care. No single agency is in charge. You and your Child and Family Team make the major decisions about your child's plan and how it is carried out, so in many ways you are in charge. There may be a time when a needed service is not available in your area. You may need to compromise, and a creative way of filling the need may have to be developed. The Community Collaborative should work together to listen carefully to the needs of Child and Family Teams and help develop a strong local System of Care to better meet those needs.

The national Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health is developing a working definition of Family Involvement to help describe the lead role that families should expect to take, especially as it relates to their children's mental health challenges and needs. According to this definition:

Family-driven means families have a primary decision making role in the care of their own children as well as the policies and procedure governing care for all children in their community, state, tribe, territory and nation. This includes:

- Choosing supports, services and providers;
- Setting goals;
- Designing and implementing programs;
- Monitoring outcomes and
- Determining the effectiveness of all efforts to promote the well being of children and youth.

### **HOW CAN I FIND OUT MORE ABOUT SYSTEM OF CARE?**

Contact Pat Solomon, Statewide Coordinator for NC Families United by email: {  
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You can also find information on the following web sites:

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**A CALL FOR SYSTEM OF CARE  
NORTH CAROLINA FAMILIES UNITED, INC./FFCMH**

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